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ABSTRACT

There is growing consensus among early childhood professionals about the importance of early childhood transition services (activities designed to ensure continuity for young children across different environments, including homes, child care settings, preschools, and schools). Providing such services requires collaboration and linkages among families; preschools, including child care and Head Start programs; schools; and health and social service providers. Increasingly, preschool children are participating in out-of-home early care settings very different in philosophy and practice from public schools. As kindergartens have become increasingly academic, many children experience early failure that may compromise their future success. Though research suggests that children benefit from transition activities, transition programs are rare. Turf issues, resistance to change, and issues of funding often exacerbate the failure of preschools and schools to communicate or collaborate. Successful transition services share several characteristics, including developmentally appropriate practices, parent involvement, and a continuum of family-focused and community-based services. When designing transition policies, states should consider convening state-level working groups of agency heads and other stakeholders and providing incentives for collaboration and local transition services. (Information on existing state policies, projects, and local models are included. Contains 57 references.) (AC)

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Transitions to School

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Children and Social Services Program

Center for Policy Research

Transitions to School

by Elizabeth Stief

Since their initial meeting in 1908 to discuss interstate water problems, the Governors have worked through the National Governors' Association to deal collectively with issues of public policy and governance. The association's ongoing mission is to support the work of the Governors by providing a bipartisan forum to help shape and implement national policy and to solve state problems.

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The association works closely with the administration and Congress on state-federal policy issues through its offices in the Hall of the States in Washington, D.C. The association serves as a vehicle for sharing knowledge of innovative programs among the states and provides technical assistance and consultant services to Governors on a wide range of management and policy issues.

The Center for Policy Research is the research and development arm of NGA. The center is a vehicle for sharing knowledge about innovative state activities, exploring the impact of federal initiatives on state government, and providing technical assistance to states. The center works in a number of policy fields, including agriculture and rural development, economic development, education, energy and environment, health, information management, social services, trade, training and employment, and transportation. The priorities for the association's research are set by the Governors.

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Foreword

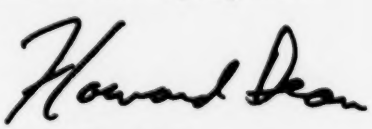
Goal One: By the Year 2000, All Children in America Will Start School Ready to Learn.

> *Objective 1: All children will have access to high-quality and developmentally appropriate preschool programs that help prepare children for school.*
>
> *Objective 2: Every parent in the United States will be a child's first teacher and devote time each day to helping such parent's preschool child learn, and parents will have access to the training and support parents need.*
>
> *Objective 3: Children will receive the nutrition, physical activity experiences, and health care needed to arrive at school with healthy minds and bodies, and to maintain the mental alertness necessary to be prepared to learn, and the number of low-birthweight babies will be significantly reduced through enhanced prenatal health systems.*

The first National Education Goal has received much public attention since it was first adopted by the nation's Governors and President George Bush in 1990. Although no one disputes the importance of children's school readiness, many questions have been raised about the danger of focusing solely on the child, when in fact many schools may not be ready for young children. There is a growing realization among policymakers that although children must be ready to learn, schools also must be ready to teach.

Unfortunately, as some schools have admirably sought to implement high standards for all students, they have increased inappropriate academic demands on young children or have instituted readiness tests that hinder children's entry into the public schools. Many experts have disputed the rationale behind the testing of young children as well as the value of early academic instruction. The National Education Goals Panel's Goal One advisory group has noted that the best way to reach high standards may be to attend to children's general well-being and provide learning environments and experiences rich in opportunities to explore, rather than to provide earlier formal academic instruction.

As policymakers adopt a broader definition of readiness—one that incorporates the role of the school in adapting to the needs, interests, and learning styles of children—services that help children make the transition from early care settings into schools are receiving increased attention. To assist Governors and other state policymakers in their efforts to reach Goal One and ensure school success for all young children, the National Governors' Association developed this report to summarize what is known about successful early childhood transition services and to highlight existing policies and approaches. The report is based on research and information gathered from a state-by-state survey and interviews with state officials and local service providers. It is hoped that this report will inform the national dialogue on early childhood transition issues and guide those struggling to implement comprehensive services for young children.



Howard Dean, M.D.
Governor of Vermont
Chair, National Governors' Association

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Executive Summary

There is a growing consensus among early childhood professionals on the importance of early childhood transition services (i.e., activities designed to ensure continuity for young children across different environments, including children's homes, child-care settings, preschools, and schools). It has become clear that in order to meet Goal One of the National Education Goals, we must ensure comprehensive and continuous services for young children (birth through age eight) through collaboration and linkages among families; preschools, including child care and Head Start programs; schools; and health and social service providers. For purposes of this report, early childhood transition services are defined as those activities designed to facilitate a child's movement into kindergarten and the primary grades.

There are many reasons for the current focus on early childhood transitions. Although experts have asserted that adjustment to kindergarten is critical to future school success, a growing number of preschool-age children are participating in out-of-home early care settings that are very different in both philosophy and practice from the public schools. As kindergartens have become nearly universal in recent years, they also have become increasingly academic in focus. As a result, many children experience early failure that may compromise their future success in school and life. Other factors focusing national attention on early childhood transition services include a growing consensus on the importance of the involvement of parents in their children's education, the reauthorization of the Head Start program and Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, systemic education reform efforts, a renewed interest in collaboration among service providers to better serve children and families, and efforts to reach Goal One of the National Education Goals. Efforts to ease the transition of Head Start children into the public schools have existed since the late 1960s, and attention has been focused on the transitions of children with disabilities since the 1980s. However, the current interest in transitions is unique because it focuses on the needs of *all* children.

The limited research available suggests that children benefit from transition activities. These studies have shown that children participating in transition activities have fewer problems adjusting to school, lower levels of stress, greater self-confidence, fewer classroom behavior problems, and less difficulty in reading. Transition services also help children maintain the gains of early intervention programs. Despite these benefits, however, transition activities are rare in most schools. During the 1989-90 school year, nearly one-third of school districts reported no organized transition activities. One reason for the low prevalence of transition activities may be the difficulty of overcoming the historical separation of preschools and elementary schools. Hostile feelings, "turf" issues, resistance to change, and issues of funding often exacerbate the tendency of preschools and schools to fail to communicate, coordinate, or collaborate. The multiple and diverse early childhood programs and settings found in many communities also complicate the ability of schools to form links with families and early care and education providers.

Successful transition services share several characteristics, including developmentally appropriate practices at both the preschool and the elementary school levels, the involvement of parents, the provision of a continuum of family-focused and community-based services, communication and collaboration between preschool and elementary school staff, and the preparation of children for the transition. Several states have policies that

address early childhood transitions, including California, Georgia, Kentucky, Maryland, New York, Ohio, Oregon, South Carolina, and Tennessee. Three states—Idaho, Kentucky, and New Jersey—have ongoing projects providing transition services for young children. Several additional states have recently launched transition initiatives.

When designing transition policies and services, states should consider convening state-level working groups of agency heads and other stakeholders, developing a framework for services, providing incentives to facilitate state-level collaboration, and providing incentives and technical assistance to localities to encourage local implementation of transition services.

In addition to implementing the above recommendations, states are encouraged to consider the following long-term strategies:

- establish early childhood units in elementary schools;
- revise assessment practices;
- reform the licensing, training, and compensation of all early childhood teachers; and
- eliminate the practice of retention in the early grades.

By ensuring that all children receive the support they need to make a successful transition to school, states can build on their school readiness efforts and help guarantee school success and a productive future for all children. As early childhood transition services continue to gain national attention, states are in a strong position to assume a lead role on this important policy issue.

Transitions: The Context

As states seek to reach the first National Education Goal—by the year 2000, all children in America will start school ready to learn—the issue of the transition of children from early care and education settings into kindergarten and the primary grades has gained increased attention. It has become clear that in order to meet this goal, we must ensure that young children (birth through age eight) receive ongoing services that are developmentally appropriate and meet their comprehensive needs. Collaboration and linkages among families; preschools, including child care and Head Start programs; schools; and health and social service providers are critical to ensuring continuity for young children and meeting this important goal.

The literature defines early childhood transitions as those activities that ensure continuity for young children across a variety of environments and activities. This continuity can be either "horizontal"—across the family, school, and community contexts in which children find themselves, or "vertical"—across the time periods of children's lives. Current thinking emphasizes a comprehensive approach to continuity that ensures the coordinated involvement of families, preschools, schools, and service agencies. For purposes of this report, early childhood transition services are defined as those activities designed to facilitate a child's movement into kindergarten and the primary grades through linkages between early care and education settings and school, between home and school, and between school and supportive services, as well as between grades. Key components of these transition services include developmentally appropriate practices at both the preschool and the elementary school levels, parent involvement, school-linked health and social services, and ongoing communication and collaboration between early care and education providers and elementary school staff.

There are many reasons for the current focus on early childhood transitions. First and foremost, adjustment to kindergarten is critical for future school success.[1] The impetus to achieve Goal One of the National Education Goals is another primary reason for focusing on transitions. However, there are several other forces that are converging to focus national attention on this issue:

- changing demographics resulting in more preschool-aged children participating in out-of-home early childhood settings;
- the prevalence of academic practices in kindergartens and kindergarten retention;
- a growing consensus on the importance of parental involvement in education;
- the reauthorization of the Head Start program and of Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act;
- systemic education reform efforts; and
- a renewed national interest in service integration and cross-agency collaboration.

Growing participation of children in preschool and child care. In 1993, 57.9 percent of mothers with children below age six were in the labor force.[2] As the number of working women with preschool-age children continues to grow, public and private preschool and child care programs will continue to expand. With large numbers of children coming to the elementary school from out-of-home early childhood settings, the issue of transition to school becomes more pressing. A 1989-90 survey found that 40 percent of incoming kindergarten children were estimated to have had some type of formal prekindergarten experience.[3] There is a growing consensus in the child development field that informal early care settings also provide critical early learning experiences that should be validated and built on in elementary schools. Unfortunately, early care settings and elementary schools rarely communicate and often have very different philosophical approaches to children's learning, resulting in very different experiences for children.

Academic practices in kindergarten and kindergarten retention. As kindergartens have become nearly universal, they have grown more academic in focus. Although this trend may be reversing, it is still a cause for concern. As a result of pressure on teachers to produce children "ready" for first grade, district or state testing and retention policies, parent preferences, and the prevalence of commercial curriculum packages—including reproducible worksheets—the kindergarten environment often is very different from that of the typical preschool. Many children entering an academically focused kindergarten face a different philosophical approach to learning and a different curriculum, instructional style, daily structure, and environment than they were exposed to in preschool. Class sizes often are larger, parental involvement is less common, and the children often are greeted with formal assessments and readiness tests. Child development experts agree that an academic style of instruction is developmentally inappropriate and incompatible with the way young children learn—stifling natural exploration and increasing child stress—and that the reliability and validity of most of the current instruments used for testing young children are highly questionable.[4]

Under these circumstances, many children are experiencing early failure that may compromise their future success in school and life. As kindergartens have become increasingly academic, retention in kindergarten and extra-year classes for children deemed not ready for kindergarten or first grade have become common. More than half (61 percent) of elementary schools routinely retain kindergarten children despite statistics showing the inequitably high rates of retention among poor, minority, and male children, and despite the negative long-term effects of retention, including lower academic achievement, increased likelihood of dropping out of school, and negative social and emotional consequences.[5] Approximately one-fifth of all schools have established extra-year classes for children prior to their kindergarten year and another one-fourth has established transition classes for children between kindergarten and first grade. These extra-year classes also fail to show academic benefits for children and seem to have the same negative effects as retention, including lowered self-concept and poorer attitudes toward school.[6]

In response to rising academic demands, many parents are choosing to delay their children's entry into kindergarten, and many states have gradually increased the age required for school entry.[7] However, these are not viable solutions and only aggravate the real problem—inappropriate kindergarten curriculum, instruction, and assessment. It is becoming increasingly clear that in addition to getting children ready for school, states also must transform schools so that they are ready for all children. This reform should include implementation of developmentally appropriate curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

Growing consensus on the importance of parental involvement in education. As states affirm the important role of parents as children's first and most important teachers, new

efforts are being made to involve parents in their children's formal educational experience in order to foster continuity of learning. There is growing consensus regarding the importance and effectiveness of parents' involvement in their children's education. A recent survey found that in schools that involve parents in transition activities, fewer children have difficulty adjusting to kindergarten.[8] Both the Head Start and Title I reauthorizations seek to strengthen parental involvement. In addition, the Goals 2000: Educate America Act, signed into law on March 31, 1994, established a new National Education Goal—by the year 2000, every school will promote partnerships that will increase parental involvement and participation in promoting the social, emotional, and academic growth of children.

Reauthorization of the Head Start and Title I programs. As more federal and state funds are being invested in the Head Start program, questions remain about the ability of elementary schools to sustain the early gains children make in Head Start and other comprehensive preschool programs for at-risk children. Although the reason for the well-documented "fade-out effect" of cognitive and achievement gains made in early intervention programs is unclear, many scholars point to the failure of elementary schools to continue the developmentally appropriate and individualized curriculum; health, nutritional, and social services; and parental involvement components provided by these programs.

The 1994 reauthorization of Head Start addresses this issue by authorizing $35 million for each of the next four years to extend and evaluate projects funded under the Head Start Transition Project Act of 1990 and to disseminate information and provide technical assistance on the implementation of effective policies and activities relating to the transition of children from Head Start programs to public schools. In addition, the reauthorization requires each Head Start agency to coordinate with local education agencies to develop and implement a systematic procedure for transferring children's records, to establish communication channels to facilitate coordination, to conduct joint meetings with parents to discuss the needs of their child, and to organize and participate in joint transition-related training. The reauthorization also requires Head Start agencies to provide training that empowers parents to take an active role in their child's elementary education, and it encourages Head Start and local education agencies to collaborate on the shared use of transportation and facilities and to exchange information on the provision of noneducational services. It is likely that the 1994 reauthorization of Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act also will establish a new grants program for local education agencies to provide transition services for low-income children who have participated in Head Start or other early childhood programs.

Systemic education reform efforts. As systemic education reform efforts continue across the states, there is an opportunity to ensure that elementary schools are ready for young children. Current thinking in the school reform movement, embodied at the federal level by Title I and Goals 2000, stresses many issues critical to successful early childhood transitions, including enriched forms of instruction in core curriculum areas, expanded professional development opportunities for educators, new approaches to assessment and accountability, stronger incentives for parental involvement, linking social services with schools, and broad engagement of the community in reform efforts.

Nationwide focus on collaboration. As states encourage cross-agency collaborations to better serve children and families, this is an opportune time for bringing education, health, and social service agencies to the table to ensure that children get all the services they need to successfully make the transition from preschool programs to kindergarten and the primary grades. Many states have established various interagency mechanisms to address coordination and collaboration of services to better meet the needs of children and families.

History of Transition Efforts

Transition has been an issue in early childhood education since the late 1960s when studies first suggested that the gains children experienced in Head Start were not maintained as they moved into the early grades of school. In the intervening years, numerous demonstration projects have been undertaken to develop effective models for the transition of children from Head Start programs into the public schools, including Follow Through, the Head Start Planned Variation Program, and Project Developmental Continuity. In 1986, when the National Initiative on Transition from Preschool to Elementary School was initiated, all Head Start programs were encouraged to implement transition activities. The search for effective models continued with the funding of fifteen Head Start transition demonstration projects. Currently, the Follow Through program provides comprehensive educational and health and human services to low-income children in kindergarten through at least third grade in forty-three sites across the country, and there are thirty-two Head Start-Public School Early Childhood Transition Demonstration Projects funded under the Head Start Transition Project Act of 1990. The 1994 reauthorization of Head Start authorizes an additional $35 million to extend and evaluate projects funded under the Head Start Transition Project Act and to disseminate information and provide technical assistance on effective transition policies and activities. Attention also has been focused on the transitions of children with disabilities since the 1980s.

Currently, however, the transition of all children into the public schools has gained increased attention. In 1988 the U.S. Department of Education launched a study of transition activities provided by public schools for children as they enter kindergarten from a preschool, child care, home, or other setting. The Collaborative Early Childhood Education Program began in 1990 as a joint effort of the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Children, Youth and Families. Working with the ten regional educational laboratories, the program seeks to strengthen linkages between early childhood and elementary school programs at the local, regional, and state levels. As a result of this initiative, the educational laboratories have sponsored regional transition conferences and are now refining and field testing a continuity framework and set of indicators for facilitating the transition to school and linkages between early childhood and elementary school services.

Relevant Research Findings

To date, research on the effectiveness of transition activities has been limited. Although studies of transition services for Head Start children who have entered the public schools have had some positive results, most of these early studies either were confounded by noncomparable treatment and control groups, did not adequately assess the implementation of the transition effort, or showed inconclusive results.[9] There is some evidence, however, that when teachers and parents participate in transition activities, children have fewer problems adjusting to school. A study of the 1986 Head Start transition projects showed that the more teachers participated in transition activities, the higher they rated the preparedness of children and the lower the children's stress during the first month of school, as reported by parents. Children receiving transition services also exhibited greater resilience in their self-confidence in the first year of formal school.[10] The evaluation of other early intervention programs for disadvantaged children also has shown that continued support for families through the elementary years, including services such as parent involvement programs and home-school liaison and family support services, can help maintain program benefits for children.[11] Although even fewer studies have looked at transition for middle-class children, available research suggests that these children also benefit from services that support the transition to school, exhibiting fewer classroom behavior problems and less difficulty with reading as they enter the second grade.[12]

Currently, however, transition activities are uncommon in schools. The National Transition Study sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education, a nationally representative survey of 830 school districts and 1,169 schools with kindergarten classes, found that during the 1989-90 school year, nearly one-third of districts (31 percent) had no organized transition activities.[13] Of districts with transition activities, only 17 percent reported a "wide range" of transition activities at most elementary schools. This low percentage may be due to the perception that transition is not a problem. A majority of schools reported that less than 10 percent of children have difficulty adjusting to kindergarten. The academic demands of kindergarten are reported to create the most difficulties for children. About one-third of high-poverty schools, however, report high levels of difficulty in this area—five times the percentage in low-poverty schools.

The study found that transition activities are more likely to take place in schools with a high degree of administrative support and that have on-site prekindergarten programs. Schools that have specific staff who are responsible for transition activities tend to have more coordination and communication with preschools. Similarly, schools with on-site prekindergarten programs are more likely to transfer student records, coordinate instructional programs, and share information and training than are schools without these programs. However, the differences in the prevalence of these activities are not large, suggesting that transition efforts must be intentional and planned, even in schools with on-site prekindergarten programs. Schools with a positive school climate also are more likely to coordinate and communicate with preschools.

There is also a correlation between the proportion of children from low-income families served by a school and the nature of transition activities. High-poverty schools are more likely to have transition activities involving coordination and communication with preschools, though this may be because these schools are more likely to house prekindergarten programs

Transition Activities in Schools with Kindergarten Classes, 1989-90 school year

Percentage of Schools Implementing the Activity	*Transition Activity*
10%	Systematic communication between kindergarten teachers and previous caregivers or teachers about entering kindergarten children
11%	Joint staff training with the participation of more than half of the staff of community preschool programs
12%	Kindergarten curriculum designed to build on the preschool program
13%	Formal transition policy
19%	Information-sharing about children's developmental progress by more than half of the staff of community preschool programs
32%	Visits by all children and parents prior to school entry
39%	Informing parents of their rights and responsibilities in the public school system
47%	Formal program for school visits
47%	Involving parents in classroom activities designed to ease children's transition to school

Source: J.M. Love, M.E. Logue, J.V. Trudeau, and K. Thayer, *Transitions to Kindergarten in American Schools* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, 1992).

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and have students who are making the transition from Head Start. Low-poverty schools, however, are more likely to have transition activities involving parents.

Many barriers to effective transitions have been identified in both research and practice. These barriers include the different educational approaches of preschools and elementary schools, the failure to transfer information or records, the failure of schools to actively engage parents in their children's formal education, and the "hostile, competitive, or patronizing attitudes of preschool or school staff toward each other."[14] Other issues identified as barriers include inflexible institutional structures, a lack of time for staff to assume additional responsibilities and initiate communication, resistance to change, "turf" issues, limited resources, fragmented funding streams, lack of a common understanding of developmentally appropriate practice, and an unclear understanding of transition issues and tasks. The multiple and diverse early childhood programs and settings found in many communities—including Head Start, child care, family day care, and preschool programs—also complicate the ability of schools to link with families and early care and education providers.

Components of Effective Transition Services

The limited research available, along with extensive anecdotal evidence, suggests that successful transition services include the following components.

- *Quality preschool experiences.* Quality early childhood programs train staff in developmentally appropriate practices. Developmentally appropriate curriculum and instruction provides for all areas of a child's development, including the physical, emotional, social, and cognitive; is individualized to each child's special interests and developmental progress; emphasizes child-initiated activities and learning through active exploration of the environment and interaction with adults, other children, and materials; and is designed to develop a child's self-esteem and positive feelings toward learning. In these programs, group size and the ratio of children to adults are limited to enable individualized and age-appropriate programming, and teachers work in partnership with parents, communicating regularly to build mutual understanding and greater consistency for children.[15]
- *Quality elementary school experiences.* As with quality preschool experiences, quality elementary programs also provide curriculum and instruction that are developmentally appropriate and are designed to develop children's knowledge and skills in all developmental areas, as well as self-esteem and positive feelings toward learning. In developmentally appropriate elementary school programs, the curriculum is integrated across traditional subject areas, primarily through projects and learning centers; parents are viewed as partners in the educational process; and group size and child-to-adult ratios are carefully regulated. The curriculum and instruction are responsive to individual differences in ability, development, and learning style, and concrete learning materials are used. Developmentally appropriate elementary programs also assess each child's progress, primarily through regular observation, and ensure continuous pupil progress without retention. The purpose of assessment in these programs is to improve and individualize instruction. No letter or number grades are given.[16]
- *Parent involvement.* A range of activities should promote parent education, involvement, and empowerment at both the

Transition Components

- **Quality preschool experiences**
- **Quality elementary school experiences**
- **Parent involvement**
- **Continuum of family-focused and community-based services**
- **Communication and collaboration between preschool and elementary school staff**
- **Preparation of children for the transition**

preschool and elementary school levels. When children are making the transition to school, parents should be encouraged to attend orientation sessions and visit the new school. They also should be encouraged to participate as volunteers in the classroom and on school policymaking bodies. Information should be provided that describes the school routine, offers ways to ease children's anxieties about school, and explains after-school child care options and available community resources. Parents should be viewed as integral partners in the education of their child and given training in how to deal with the public education system. In addition, schools need to make special efforts to reach out to families whose children were not enrolled in early childhood programs through home visits prior to school entry.

- *Continuum of family-focused and community-based services.* It is important to develop a network of community services available to families on site or by referral to continue the health and social services currently available in comprehensive preschool programs, such as health care, nutrition, mental health counseling, adult basic education, parenting education, home visits, and other child and family support services, including child care and after-school and summer enrichment and recreational activities. Family support plans are another option for ensuring that families receive all the services they need.
- *Communication and collaboration between preschool and elementary school staff.* Effective communication and collaboration includes exchange visitation, record sharing, discussion of individual children's progress, and regular communication. Joint planning, joint staff development, and joint parent-teacher conferences also are important collaborative efforts.
- *Preparation of children for the transition.* Preparing children for the transition includes scheduling visits to the elementary school; planning for the elementary school experience through discussions, dramatic play, and reading books; and having a kindergarten teacher or student visit early childhood programs to talk about elementary school. Phasing in new students in small groups and providing individual transition plans for children also can ease the transition to school.

Successful initiatives share several additional characteristics, including:

- clear goals and objectives agreed upon by all parties involved;
- a shared commitment to the successful transitions of young children;
- shared decisionmaking among home, preschool, school, and community representatives;
- cultural sensitivity;
- specific assignment of roles and responsibilities among all parties, including interagency agreements;
- training and technical assistance on collaboration and systems-building;
- reasonable time and adequate fiscal resources to allow staff to carry out assigned roles;
- specific timelines for transition activities; and
- continuous program evaluation and improvement efforts.

Many of these components can be implemented without significant increases in resources. States and localities highlighted in the following sections have utilized collaborative relationships and a variety of funding streams, including Title I, the Child Care and Development Block Grant, the Bilingual Education Act, Head Start, Even Start, and state preschool funds. In addition, Florida has accessed lottery funds to help finance its efforts, and grants from foundations have helped some of the local projects. The Head Start Transition Project Act of 1990 provides funding for thirty-two projects, including Idaho's state-level initiative, and several states have used the Head Start-State Collaboration Project grants as a catalyst for transition efforts.

State and Local Transition Initiatives

Several states have policies that address aspects of early childhood transitions. Others have recently launched initiatives. Three states—Idaho, Kentucky, and New Jersey—and many localities have ongoing projects providing transition services for young children. The majority of these initiatives address all of the key components of successful transition services.

8

State Policies

Several states have policies that address early childhood transitions. California, Georgia, Kentucky, Maryland, New York, Ohio, Oregon, South Carolina, and Tennessee all have policies that address some aspect of transition. To date, however, no state has been able to create a comprehensive policy on early childhood transitions for all children.

California. In California the seminal report of the California Department of Education's School Readiness Task Force, titled *Here They Come: Ready or Not!*, established state policy on transitions and has resulted in more effective transition practices statewide. The recommendations of the task force—including developmentally appropriate practices, parental involvement, appropriate assessments, and cultural and linguistic sensitivity—are being widely implemented across the state.

Another outcome of this report was legislation enacted in 1992 authorizing early primary programs (i.e., preschool through grade three integrated, developmentally appropriate programs). These programs may include various instructional strategies such as heterogeneous grouping, active learning, and small-group instruction; authentic assessments; parent education and involvement; and planned articulation among preschool, kindergarten, and primary grades. The legislation requires school districts implementing these programs to carry out the following activities to ensure educational continuity.

- Establish connections with public preschool programs, including the state preschool, the state child development program, and federal Head Start programs, to establish a more effective transition for children from preschool to kindergarten.
- Promote connections among early primary programs that provide before- and after-school services.
- Promote joint activities among teachers and administrators of public preschool programs, kindergarten programs, and first-, second-, and third-grade classes. Areas of coordination include program planning and staff development training related to developmentally appropriate curriculum and assessment practices for young children.

Georgia. In Georgia the Governor's comprehensive prekindergarten program provides transition activities for children and families as part of the service delivery model.

Kentucky. The Kentucky Education Reform Act of 1990 (KERA) established preschool programs for at-risk four-year-olds, an ungraded primary school program that replaces kindergarten through the third grade, and family resource centers in elementary

schools in which 20 percent or more of the student population is eligible for the free lunch program. To ensure the successful transition of children to school, the KERA preschool programs are required to include a plan for coordination of program philosophy and activities with the local district's primary school program. These programs also must include developmentally appropriate practices, parent involvement, and collaboration with health and social services, KERA family resource centers, child care providers, Head Start programs, and other preschool programs.

The primary school program mandated under KERA is consistent with the preschool program and ensures continuity for young children by providing for:

- developmentally appropriate educational practices;
- multiage/multiability classrooms;
- continuous pupil progress;
- authentic assessment;
- qualitative reporting of children's progress;
- professional teamwork; and
- positive parent involvement.

Maryland. Standards of quality for Maryland's public school prekindergarten programs also address early childhood transitions. Indicators of quality for the Maryland prekindergarten programs include the following.

- School staff coordinate with child care and education providers in order to ensure that children's transitions are not disruptive to their healthy development.
- School staff use a transition form, with a parent's written permission, that enables them to obtain information about children from their most recent child care or education providers.
- The school or school system collaborates with other agencies in examining family needs for child care and early childhood education. Plans for expansion of the early childhood system take into consideration existing providers and services.
- The school or school system collaborates with other community agencies to increase each parent's access to prekindergarten and/or licensed child care programs that encompass the full working day.
- The school facilitates the development and implementation of innovative programs that address the child care and education needs of families in the community.

New York. The New York Board of Regents has adopted a policy on early childhood consisting of five entitlements. One entitlement is that "every child will have access to an environment which builds a foundation for lifelong learning and successful transitions from early childhood to the middle, high school and higher levels of education, work citizenship and adulthood." A corresponding set of activities has been designed to implement this entitlement. Examples include providing technical assistance and collaborating with public early childhood programs to disseminate information to parents. Additionally, 100 prekindergarten programs have been funded to ensure the provision of appropriate educational programs and services to at-risk prekindergarten children. These programs carry out activities to ensure a smooth transition to kindergarten and the primary grades.

Ohio. In Ohio public preschool program plans for three- and four-year-old children must include a demonstration of the coordination, collaboration, or contractual relationships to be undertaken to ensure a plan for available, accessible, and comprehensive services and the transition of children to kindergarten programs. Plans also must describe a system for ongoing communication among the Head Start and preschool providers, cross-training of staff and parents, and continuing improvement of service delivery. All schools in Ohio are encouraged to develop transition plans with parents and local child care providers for children entering kindergarten programs. All schools also are encouraged to implement programs based on sound early childhood theory and practice for children in preschool through third grade.

Oregon. In Oregon the state prekindergarten program uses federal Head Start performance standards and eligibility requirements with an enhanced public school transition component. In addition, education reform legislation authorizing kindergarten through third grade early childhood programs in Oregon elementary schools encourages the following components, consistent with both Head Start and the Oregon prekindergarten program:

- developmentally appropriate nongraded primary programs;
- cooperative efforts with other programs for young children;
- comprehensive health and social services;
- increased parent involvement in decision-making at the school site;
- home visits;
- adoption of programs and practices with proven effectiveness; and
- planned transition from prekindergarten programs to kindergarten through the third grade.

South Carolina. South Carolina's Early Childhood and Academic Assistance Act of 1993 requires school districts to establish early childhood initiatives that integrate preschool for four-year-olds, parent education, and kindergarten through third grade practices. The design for these early childhood initiatives must include the establishment of activities for assisting children and their parents with the transitions between the various levels of schooling and phases of education.

Tennessee. To meet Goal One of the National Education Goals, Tennessee has developed a policy for early childhood education and parent involvement programs serving at-risk four-year-olds and their families. Under the Master Plan for Tennessee Schools: Preparing for the 21st Century, these programs should be phased in by the end of the 1996-97 school year, though no funding has been allocated to date. State policy on these early childhood programs encourages a continued partnership among the family, school, and community during the child's school-age years and requires "follow through" services for children and families enrolled in the programs. The local school system is responsible for seeing that interagency collaboration involving all appropriate agencies occurs for these programs and continues in kindergarten and the primary grades. State policy also calls for early childhood programs to create a continuum with kindergarten and primary grade programs. In addition, local school systems must develop early childhood units incorporating the concepts of nongraded, early childhood primary programs in order to provide continuous experiences for children.

Emerging State Efforts

Several additional states are beginning to look at early childhood transitions. In Arkansas the Governor's kindergarten through third grade initiative has served as a catalyst for early childhood transition efforts. Legislation requested by the Governor last year allocated $9.3 million for kindergarten through third grade staff development, model parent involvement projects, and free summer school for more than 20,000 children. Building on this initiative, the Governor is convening an Early Childhood Institute to provide a forum for the preschool and public school communities to discuss transitions and developmentally appropriate curriculum and assessment. Representatives from Head Start, the Home Instruction Program for Preschool Youngsters (HIPPY), and child care will be in attendance, as well as school superintendents, elementary principals and teachers, and personnel from the Arkansas Departments of General Education and Higher Education. Through the Early Childhood Institute, Arkansas hopes to begin to develop state guidelines for early childhood transition services.

In Delaware the Research for Better Schools Regional Educational Laboratory and the Delaware Department of Public Instruction are organizing an Early Childhood Transition Committee. They are using the Project STEPS (Sequential Transition to Education in the Public Schools) model developed for special education children and are beginning to

develop policy. As part of this effort, the department of public instruction is creating an early childhood staff position to coordinate all birth through age five programs and to address transitions.

Florida is working to develop an Early Childhood Collaboration Plan through a joint effort by the state's Head Start community, the Florida Children's Forum, the State Coordinating Council for Early Childhood Services, the department of education, and the department of health and rehabilitative services. The purpose of the plan is to promote accessible and affordable early childhood experiences of high quality for all of the state's low-income preschool children and their families. The collaboration plan will promote the development of transition plans among programs that sequentially serve children and families. This includes transition between early childhood programs and public schools, as well as between early childhood providers themselves. Under the plan, parents will be offered maximum opportunities to be active partners in transition planning and implementation.

Consistent with this plan, Florida has funded twenty-one Collaborative Partnership Incentive Projects across the state through lottery discretionary dollars. These projects support partnerships among school districts, Head Start grantees, central agencies, and nonpublic programs serving at-risk prekindergarten children and their families. Intended outcomes include effective interagency agreements, improved program quality, expanded availability of comprehensive services, coordinated training opportunities for staff, and improved transition among programs and into kindergarten.

Virginia has formed an interagency state transition team of early childhood specialists from the department of social services (child care and licensing divisions), the department of education (early childhood division), and the Virginia Council on Child Day Care and Early Childhood Programs. The team's first activity was to hold an education and awareness event for state-level policymakers in April 1993. That summer the council issued a request for proposals for transition planning minigrants, funding two sites at $2,000 each. Two additional sites received scholarships to the Appalachian Educational Laboratory Regional Transition Conference. Both sites with planning grants recently received $10,000 to implement their plans. In response to local requests, the council held a second transition conference in April 1994 for seven interagency teams formed by local Head Start programs that included Head Start and public school personnel, social service and health providers, and representatives from the child care community. This conference provided information on the community planning process and gave participants practical guidelines for initiating transition activities in their communities.

West Virginia's Early Childhood Transition Initiative is coordinated by a steering committee that includes representation from the department of education, the department of health and human resources, Head Start, parent resource centers, child care programs, and the Governor's cabinet on children and families. The goal is to create a state framework of policies and procedures to address the transition of all young children between programs and agencies and include provisions to respond to federal mandates for the transition of children with disabilities and their families. To date, the initiative has surveyed local stakeholders to determine needs at state meetings of local school district special education directors, interagency coordinating councils, parent resource centers, and Head Start programs. Three subcommittees are working on a framework for interagency policy, training and technical assistance, and community collaboration. The subcommittees' work will be integrated into a final report, which will be presented to the Governor's cabinet on children and families and its member agencies for adoption, endorsement, and dissemination.

Several states are beginning to address transitions through the Head Start-State Collaboration Projects. Twenty-two states—Alaska,

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California, Colorado, Georgia, Iowa, Kentucky, Maine, Maryland, Minnesota, Nebraska, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, South Dakota, Texas, Vermont, and Virginia—currently have five-year grants, and the 1994 Head Start reauthorization authorizes funds for the U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services to award a collaboration grant to each state. The currently funded Head Start-State Collaboration Project grants have been awarded to Governors to:

- facilitate the involvement of Head Start in the development of state-level policies, priorities, and resource allocations that affect the Head Start population and other low-income families;
- create significant, cross-cutting initiatives on behalf of children and families throughout the state;
- help build more integrated and comprehensive service delivery systems to improve families' access to services and promote a high level of program quality; and
- encourage widespread local collaboration between Head Start and other programs.

Enhancing the transition of children from preschool to elementary school is one of six priority areas states may choose to focus on. Several states have issued minigrants to sites to work on transitions. South Carolina has funded twelve school districts and ten Head Start grantees to work on transitions through the collaboration grant. As part of its Head Start-State Collaboration Project, Maine conducted a survey of Head Start programs on the prevalence of transition activities and awarded minigrants to programs for transition planning in collaboration with the public schools.

As part of its Head Start-State Collaboration Project, Oregon cosponsored a conference with the Northwest Regional Laboratory and the Region X Head Start office for twenty-two local transition-planning teams made up of public school and Head Start administrators, teachers, parents, and social service and special needs agency staff. Five local teams were selected to pilot comprehensive early childhood services for children from birth through the third grade. The collaboration project specialist and other department of education staff are providing training and technical assistance to help pilot teams develop local transition models using existing funds and collaborative relationships. Oregon State University is conducting a study documenting their progress.

In Pennsylvania local Head Start programs were invited to develop proposals for minigrants to create early childhood transition teams with representation from early intervention programs, child care programs, and public schools. These teams received training on "team-building" and the collaborative process from Lehigh University and developed their own community plans for helping young children and their families make the transition through early childhood programs into public schools. Pennsylvania is continuing to provide training for local transition teams and also is disseminating information on effective transition practices and working with twenty model programs.

Supported in part by the Head Start-State Collaboration Project grants, the departments of education in Iowa and Nebraska have worked together to produce *The Primary Program: Growing and Learning in the Heartland,* a curriculum framework that promotes continuity in the early grades and addresses the transition to school. It is an adaptation of the British Columbia Primary Program and is intended to assist local schools as they strive to provide developmentally appropriate learning environments. A section on easing transitions addresses the benefits and elements of successful transitions. The Nebraska project also provides minigrants jointly to Head Start programs and elementary schools to develop transition projects.

Virginia's Head Start-State Collaboration Project grant is helping fund the transition efforts of the Virginia Council on Child Day Care and Early Childhood Programs.

State Transition Projects

A limited number of states have ongoing projects providing transition services for young children. Idaho's Head Start Transition Project operates at the state level. Kentucky is training preschool and elementary school teachers across the state in the development of community transition systems. New Jersey is providing funding to high-poverty school districts to establish collaborative preschool programs with a strong transition component; to reform curriculum, instruction, and assessment in the early grades; and to ensure continuous access to comprehensive services.

Idaho Head Start Transition Project

The Idaho Head Start Transition Project is one of the thirty-two grantees that received funding in 1991 to implement the Head Start Transition Project Act. The only state grantee, Idaho is providing comprehensive services in three demonstration sites to 379 children and their families across six school districts. Forty-three schools and 140 teachers are involved. Goals of the project include:

- providing comprehensive services to children and families;
- providing parents with the knowledge and skills for finding and using family services available in the community;
- encouraging a partnership between school professionals and parents to help children fully achieve their potential, both academically and socially; and
- studying the long-term value of transition services to the success of the child and family.

Employing a broad definition of transition, the Idaho project provides ongoing support to children and families throughout the early childhood years. It seeks to develop close working relationships between community agencies that serve children and families, as well as between Head Start and elementary school staff. The project extends the array of services being provided by the Head Start program, including:

- ongoing coordination of educational services to children and families;
- ongoing coordination of medical and health services to children and families;
- ongoing coordination of parent involvement in educational programs; and
- ongoing coordination of social services to children and families.

Each demonstration site has a transition coordinator and one family service specialist for every thirty-five families served. All staff are trained in transition activities. Home visits are conducted a minimum of four times per year, with additional visits as needed. Individual transition plans are developed for each family. These plans are reviewed and updated at least twice a year. Supportive services are provided directly by family service specialists and through referrals to various public and private agencies and support systems within the communities. Each community has developed an extensive network of these agencies, including health and human service agencies, libraries, colleges and universities, local charities, local chambers of commerce, and local businesses. Project funds are set aside for needed services, such as dental care, that are not available from any other source. Parent meetings provide with an opportunity for mutual support, information sharing, and

The Idaho Head Start Transition Project is linking children and families with a full range of community resources, including local chambers of commerce, libraries, and colleges and universities.

input in the demonstration activities. In addition, parents account for a majority of members on the governing board of the project.

Transition staff also meet with Head Start, kindergarten, and first- and second-grade teachers to share information. The project facilitates three-way sharing among transition coordinators, Head Start teachers, and public school teachers and encourages school districts to implement developmentally appropriate practices to ease the transition of children into the early grades. It has sponsored training in the High Scope curriculum model in one school district, in conjunction with Head Start, and training in developmentally appropriate practices for kindergarten teachers in another. A consultant from the state department of education has disseminated early childhood information and has facilitated meetings throughout the state.

This year the focus of the project is on promoting interagency collaboration and the empowerment of families to access resources and develop partnerships with school staff. To increase collaboration across agencies, the project director is participating in a school-linked health committee with representatives from education and health and welfare agencies, health districts, and the Idaho Office for Children. The project also is working to increase awareness within communities regarding the needs of families and ways to improve services. With fourth-year funding, the Idaho Head Start Transition Project will seek to build legislative awareness of transition services at the local, state, and national levels and will continue working on the education, health, social services, and parent involvement components of the project.

The Kentucky Transition Project is training infant and toddler, preschool, and primary education staff as a team.

Kentucky Transition Project

The Kentucky Transition Project provides statewide training and technical assistance on transition issues for children from birth to age eight. The project uses the STEPS (Sequential Transition to Education in the Public Schools) model to provide training for preschool and elementary school teachers in community transition system development (infant to preschool and preschool to elementary). The model was developed for the transition of children with disabilities into public school special education placement, but the process is equally appropriate for the transition from any early childhood programs and has been adapted to encompass that concept. The four components of the model are administration, staff involvement, family involvement, and child preparation.

- *Administration.* The administration component establishes the framework for interagency collaboration and policy development. It provides a process for developing an effective administrative structure by clarifying the roles and responsibilities of participants, establishing timelines for the transition process, developing and institutionalizing operational procedures, managing forms and other documentation, developing staff training and parent involvement activities related to transition, and establishing followup procedures for children who have made the transition.
- *Staff involvement.* Staff involvement includes training staff to work with other agencies or programs, with families, and with children to ease the transition, as well as providing for cross-program visitation.
- *Family involvement.* Family involvement includes providing parents with the skills to prepare a child for transition and the information and skills necessary to access services from a variety of agencies or programs in order to continue receiving supplemental services that may have been available in preschool but are not available in the primary grades.

- *Child preparation.* The final component, child preparation, includes assessing a child's readiness for the next educational placement, planning child instruction in the current program related to skills a child will need for the next educational placement, and conducting followup activities after placement to ensure program continuity.

Under the Kentucky project model, infant/toddler, preschool, and primary education staff attend training as a team. There are seventeen original model STEPS sites and twenty-two new sites that were established during 1993-94. STEPS training is available to all school districts by request. Forty-four school districts currently are involved with the project, and most districts have attended awareness/orientation sessions on the model. Consistent with the goals of the transition project, all state-funded preschool programs in Kentucky are required to coordinate their program's philosophy and activities with those of the local school district's primary school program.

A study of seven of the transition project sites by Project STEPS in 1992-93 found that sites implemented an average of twenty-one new transition activities during the year of the study. The greatest amount of change occurred in the areas of child preparation for the next environment and in the establishment of roles and responsibilities across agencies for the transition process. The Kentucky Transition Project is funded jointly through grants from the Kentucky Department of Education and the Kentucky Cabinet for Human Resources.

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New Jersey's GoodStarts Program

The GoodStarts program in New Jersey operates under a three-year funding cycle. It is designed to institutionalize the preschool component of the program using existing resources, while continuing kindergarten through second-grade program extensions and improvements.

The GoodStarts program in New Jersey is designed to provide low-income children with a unified program of comprehensive child and family services from prekindergarten through the second grade. The program was established in the 1992-93 school year and is administered by the department of education in collaboration with the department of human services. Program goals include the following.

- To expand opportunities for low-income urban children, three and four years old, to participate in effective full-day preschool programs providing appropriate curriculum, parent involvement and education opportunities, and child and family access to needed health and social services such as extended child care and nutritional services.
- To foster collaborative planning among local public school systems and community agencies for continuity of educational and other child and family services through second grade and a smooth transition from preschool programs into elementary programs.
- To encourage the improvement of early childhood programs, prekindergarten through second grade, through professional development, staff training, collaborative planning for curriculum content, instructional practices, and assessment that draw upon contemporary theory, research, and demonstration concerning what works with low-income urban children.

Eligible GoodStarts grantees include the thirty designated special needs school districts in the state. The program is administered at the local level by the local boards of education in collaboration with Head Start agencies, state-subsidized child care providers, and other community-based child and family support agencies, including health, social services, and employment. Nine districts are currently participating in the program. One additional district is expected to receive a grant for fiscal 1995. GoodStarts is funded through state appropriations and by the federal Child Care and Development Block Grant, which is administered by the New Jersey Department of Human Services.

The program operates under a three-year funding cycle and is designed to institutionalize the preschool component of the program through a shift to recurring funding sources over this cycle—such as regular state aid for four-year-olds and Head Start expansion funds for three-year-olds—while continuing kindergarten through second-grade program extensions and improvements. Performance standards for programmatic continuity require that grantees and their collaborative bodies develop, implement, and review a plan for continuity of educational experiences; access to necessary health, nutritional, and social services; and parental involvement in elementary school. The plan for programmatic continuity must include, but not be limited to:

- establishment of a subcommittee composed of GoodStarts program staff and parents, local school district staff and parents, and representatives of other community-based child and family services agencies;
- identification of the critical elements necessary to facilitate the transition of children from the GoodStarts program into the local elementary school program;
- coordination of educational goals, curricula, and instructional approaches;
- determination of appropriate activities, materials, and timelines necessary for implementation;
- identification of the information needed by the school district at kindergarten entry, and development of a plan to maintain and transfer children's prekindergarten records to the elementary school with informed parental consent;
- delineation of transitional steps to preserve continuity of parental involvement and parent education;
- coordination of professional development activities for administrative, instructional, and support staff to foster the specified continuity;
- outreach to other prekindergarten programs that send children to the same elementary schools; and
- establishment of steps and a timetable for monitoring and evaluating the implementation of the transition plan.

Expected outcomes for the children and their families under the GoodStarts program include better preparation for kindergarten in educational and social skills, improved health and nutritional status, higher rates of achievement in primary grades and later years, greater interest and stronger self-confidence in school work, and enhanced parental support and involvement. The state is beginning to collect evaluation data.

Local Models

Transition services are much more common at the local level than at the state level. The following local transition initiatives were selected to give a sense of the range of services provided, and they are reflective of numerous other local initiatives around the country.

Head Start-Public School Transition Project, Birmingham Public Schools, Birmingham, Alabama

The Birmingham Head Start-Public School Transition Project was initiated by the local superintendent of schools.

The Birmingham Head Start-Public School Transition Project was established to maintain the parental involvement initiated in Head Start and ease the transition of Head Start children into the public schools. At the request of the superintendent, the school district's early childhood specialist and the local Head Start director developed a "Cooperative Transition Plan" that outlines the responsibilities of the Head Start program, the Birmingham Public Schools, parents, and children. An integrated curriculum reflecting developmentally appropriate practice from Head Start through the third grade was developed by a team of Head Start and elementary school teachers, and Head Start teachers developed a "Getting Ready for Kindergarten" study unit that includes a field trip to a public school where the children can participate in kindergarten classroom activities. Head Start and public school teachers communicate regularly and collaborate on parent orientation sessions and a kindergarten open house. Head Start teachers ensure that children's records are transferred from Head Start to their elementary school. Public school teachers in Birmingham report that Head Start children are making strong social and academic gains. Teachers and administrators also report that parental participation in school activities has increased since the implementation of the project.

Marin City-Sausalito Transition to Schools Project, Far West Laboratory, Sausalito, California

The Marin City-Sausalito Transition to Schools Project bridges low-income, mostly African American communities and upper-income, mostly white communities.

The goal of the Marin City-Sausalito Transition to Schools Project is to support the development of linkages between the Sausalito elementary school program and the Marin City early childhood programs, including Head Start, state-funded child development preschool, and after-school services. The project serves the low-income, mostly African American community of Marin City and the upper-income, mostly white Sausalito elementary school district where the Marin City children attend school. A leadership group—including program directors from Marin City early childhood services and the Sausalito elementary school district—meets regularly to set goals and monitor the project. A teacher group with representatives from both communities also was convened and joint staff development was arranged. The project has developed a community-based kindergarten orientation that has resulted in a dramatic increase in parent participation. A needs assessment of parents of preschool and elementary school children also was conducted, and a new student portfolio is being developed for use by both the early childhood and early elementary school programs. As a result of the project, parents report more positive feelings toward the elementary school and more enthusiasm for involvement in elementary school programs.

Project Transfer integrates federal, state, and local funding streams and collaborates with a state interagency prevention program.

Project Transfer, Carpentersville, Illinois

Project Transfer, one of the thirty-two national Head Start-Public School Early Childhood Transition Demonstration Projects, provides and coordinates services in three school districts forty miles northwest of Chicago. The project assists children and families in the transition from Head Start to public schools by providing comprehensive and continuous developmental, educational, wellness, and support services for families, including family education and referrals to community resources.

Components of the transition project include:

- workshops and ongoing assistance to schools on developmentally appropriate curricula, portfolio assessments, and transitions;
- family educators and family-school liaisons who provide home visits, parent-child activities, educational materials, and referrals to community resources;
- coordination with local colleges for adult education and lifelong learning opportunities;
- family wellness clinics; and
- coordination and collaboration among local service providers for better delivery of services to children and families.

To fund these activities, the project has integrated federal, state, and local funding streams, including Title I, Even Start, the Bilingual Education Act, and state prekindergarten funds. The project staff also work closely with staff of Project Success, a state-sponsored, interagency prevention program that coordinates health and social service programs for school-age children and their families.

Preliminary findings include the following.

- *Expanded health and wellness services to families.* Because of the availability of services, few, if any, students were missing immunizations, physicals, or dental exams.
- *Increased family involvement in schools.* Attendance has increased at open houses, and families who previously felt unwelcome at the schools or who were self-conscious about their limited English proficiency are participating in school activities in greater numbers. The availability of family programs, parent support groups, and school communications in Spanish as well as English has greatly increased the involvement of Hispanic families in the schools. Family educators also serve as translators to facilitate communication between parents with limited English proficiency and school personnel.
- *Improved coordination among social and health service agencies in the community.* Agencies are becoming more informed about what other agencies are offering, resulting in more efficient delivery of services. A computerized database of available services is being created as a result of this cooperative effort.
- *Increased use of transition plans.* Project schools are increasingly including transition plans as a key component of their school improvement plans.

Be-Four School Project, Charlevoix-Emmet Intermediate School District, Charlevoix, Michigan

The Be-Four project provides intensive child preparation through hands-on play, individual transition plans, and visits to school.

The Be-Four project boosts children's prospects for school success by easing the transition to elementary school. Supported by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation School Readiness Initiative, the project serves the Charlevoix-Emmet Intermediate School District, consisting of eleven rural school districts serving 10,460 students across 1,105 square miles in northern Michigan.

The project consists of a series of home visits involving hands-on play to stimulate preschool children and give their parents the tools to be their child's first teachers. During these visits, the home visitor and parent also work together to develop a transition plan for the child that includes a visit to the kindergarten, discussion of school expectations, identification of and preparation for potential changes in routines the child will encounter in the new program, and a home visit with the kindergarten teacher. The project also connects families to comprehensive agency services, provides parent-school activities, and helps familiarize kindergarten teachers with incoming students.

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Project PREPARE, Dickinson-Iron Intermediate School District, Kingsford, Michigan

Through Project PREPARE, teachers who have received special training in home visiting provide ongoing home visits from prekindergarten through second grade.

Project PREPARE (Promoting Realistic Educator Parent Awareness for Relevant Education) seeks to improve the home-school relationship and empower parents as their children's first teachers through ongoing home visits from prekindergarten through second grade, as well as through joint training for parents and teachers that addresses their cooperative roles in the education of young children. The project helps ease the transition of children into the three elementary schools in the district. It is supported in part through a grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation School Readiness Initiative.

The three goals of Project PREPARE are to:

- offer definitive strategies to enhance the effectiveness of families as they work with their children to better ensure the attainment of agreed upon instructional objectives and to instill positive attitudes toward formal education;
- provide support for families and school staff in the building of an educational partnership between home and school; and
- develop new school procedures and practices to meet changing demographic characteristics and the needs of families with school-age children.

Local early childhood department personnel have provided training and mentoring opportunities for both public school teachers and parents involved in the project. Teachers have received training in home visitation philosophy and technique and technical assistance on developmentally appropriate teaching techniques. Preliminary evidence suggests that Project PREPARE is strengthening the relationship between home and school and easing the transition of children to the public schools.

The Saint Paul project stresses family empowerment and ongoing home-school communication.

Saint Paul Public Schools Transition Demonstration Project, Saint Paul, Minnesota.

One of the national Head Start-Public School Early Childhood Transition Demonstration Projects, the Saint Paul project develops and implements parent involvement programs, creates and builds upon existing family support networks, ensures family access to health services, and promotes developmentally appropriate practices in elementary classrooms. Efforts to establish permanent connections between the schools and Head Start are ongoing. The project provides services to Head Start and non-Head Start children in three elementary schools in Saint Paul in four key areas.

- *Developmentally appropriate practices.* Teachers in the participating elementary schools are being trained in the High Scope curriculum model and also have received summer training on portfolio assessment. Funds provided by the Minnesota Legislature have enabled each of the three schools to create additional kindergarten and first-grade classrooms and reduce class size.
- *Health and nutrition.* A half-time wellness coordinator provides outreach and follow-up to the health and developmental screenings conducted prior to entry into kindergarten. Nutrition classes are provided by the University of Minnesota.
- *Family support services.* The project conducts parent education classes and family literacy activities, and it provides at least three home visits a year for families with children in kindergarten, first grade, and second grade. Family plans guide services, and families are referred to existing community agencies when necessary.
- *Parent involvement.* Ongoing communication between families and the school is maintained, and family activities are developed with parent input. Opportunities for parent involvement are designed to empower families and build skills necessary to maintain family involvement.

Teachers report that the project has stimulated parent and family involvement in the schools and has resulted in classrooms that are more developmentally appropriate.

At West Oxford Elementary School, cooperative teaching teams use a whole language approach and cross-age, cross-grade level groupings.

West Oxford Elementary School, Oxford, North Carolina.

West Oxford Elementary School serves preschool through second-grade students in rural north-central North Carolina. Minority students comprise 54 percent of the student population. As part of a districtwide restructuring program, West Oxford Elementary School created a continuous progress curriculum to meet the developmental needs of children and ease their transition from the preschool into the elementary school program. The model includes:

- cooperative teaching teams;
- a developmental curriculum designed by the school staff that includes cross-age, cross-grade level groupings, whole language, and authentic assessment, including student portfolios; and
- flexible scheduling.

The program at West Oxford Elementary School has received recognition from the Governor, the North Carolina Association of Educators, and the National Education Association.

Amanda E. Stout Elementary School, Reading, Pennsylvania.

Designated a model transition site by both the Research for Better Schools Regional Educational Laboratory and the Pennsylvania Head Start-State Collaboration Project, the Amanda E. Stout Elementary School offers a variety of services to meet the needs of children and their families. Located in an urban community, the school has a Family Center for Child Development that offers educational and support services for families of infants and toddlers, a Head Start program, a prekindergarten program, and an Even Start program, as well as a large Title I program. Transition activities focus on providing continuity across all participating programs and services through the following.

- Developmentally appropriate practice, including a "whole language" approach, coordinated curriculum (themes and learning objectives) from preschool through first grade, and authentic assessment, including the use of student portfolios.
- A collaborative system to ensure available and appropriate support services for all children and families across grades and programs.
- Team development with increased communication and joint planning both within and across programs and services.
- On-site health and social services for all children and families.
- A philosophy of parent involvement that presents the site as a respectful, culturally appropriate, friendly, and open environment, ensuring the creation of home-school-community partnerships.

Amanda E. Stout Elementary offers on-site health and social services.

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Conclusion

Successful transition initiatives can have numerous benefits for children, including enhanced self-confidence, increased motivation, improved relationships with other children and adults, increased openness to new experiences, and a greater sense of trust between teachers and children.[17] Transition activities also can empower parents and encourage them to develop a more positive attitude toward, and relationship with, the school and their child's teachers. When transition services are successfully implemented, teachers also benefit. They are more aware of the needs of their students and are able to meet these needs with the support of parents, community resources such as social and health services, and a larger network of professional support.[18]

Currently, however, the majority of schools have not implemented transition activities. Although states are beginning to recognize the need for transition services, there appears to be a need for more assistance in identifying successful practices and in developing comprehensive state policies and services. Current state policies typically are limited to coordination of state preschool programs with the elementary school, and statewide transition services are rare. Among teachers and administrators, there is a lack of knowledge about transition activities and developmentally appropriate practices. The authors of the National Transition Study note that although most schools consider their kindergarten programs to be developmental, they rate themselves relatively low on some of the key classroom activities that early childhood educators define as developmentally appropriate practice.

The National Transition Study also suggests that special attention should be focused on schools serving a high proportion of low-income children. Low-income children are less likely to have had preschool experiences prior to school entry and are more likely to have difficulty adjusting to kindergarten, as reported by teachers.[19] High-poverty schools also tend to have a greater academic focus in kindergarten, and they are more likely to retain children and establish extra-year or transition classes.[20] In addition, it is often difficult to get low-income parents involved in school activities. They often have negative perceptions

of schools based on their own experiences and other high-priority concerns that limit the time they can devote to their child's education.

It is important to keep several caveats in mind when designing transition services and policies. The literature notes that continuity is the goal of these efforts, not transition; transition is a means to achieve continuity. However, continuity is not necessarily good for its own sake. States need to look at the quality of early childhood programs as well as that of elementary programs and must be cautious not to foster the continuity of poor-quality programs. When planning for continuity in early childhood programs, states should strive for a continuous progression of child growth, learning, and development.

Transition policies also must be sufficiently broad to meet local needs. Children's early childhood settings differ, as does the character of local elementary schools. Preschools, parents, teachers, and schools should have the flexibility to work together to address specific needs or concerns.

At the federal level, there is a need for:

- more research on effective transition practices and the impact of transition activities on children's later school achievement;
- continuity between federal programs serving the same populations of children as they move from preschool to elementary school, especially between Head Start and Title I; and
- the removal of categorical barriers to the integration of education and human service program funds to create comprehensive transition services at the local level.

State Recommendations

As states begin efforts or continue existing efforts to address early childhood transitions, the state role must be clearly defined. Research and experience suggest that states should consider taking the following steps.

Convene state-level working groups representative of the various stakeholders. States are in a unique position to play an enabling role in the provision of early childhood transition services. This begins with their ability to bring agency heads to the table to establish the framework for state and local collaboration. It includes removing barriers to the creative use of both funds and staff at the local level (e.g., outstationing health or social service staff in schools and preschools).

Develop a framework for early childhood transition services. When developing state frameworks for early childhood transition services, state-level agency heads should consider:

- reaching out to the entire early childhood community, rather than to just Head Start or state-funded preschool programs;
- expanding the availability of quality preschool programs, especially for low-income children;
- providing for joint staff training (preschool and public school teachers) in developmentally appropriate practices, including curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment;
- ensuring a strong parental involvement component that goes beyond parent-teacher conferences, the parent-teacher association (PTA), and fundraisers;
- reaching out to families whose children are not enrolled in early childhood programs through home visits and the provision of information on school expectations and child and family support services available in the community;
- facilitating continuous access to comprehensive supportive services, including health, social services, and child and family support services such as child care and after-school and summer enrichment and recreational activities;
- establishing a structure for communication and collaboration between early childhood and public school teachers, and
- targeting high-poverty schools.

Facilitate state-level collaboration. States should consider using incentives to overcome barriers and institutional resistance to collaboratio... including the availability of small grants for collaborative ventures at the state agency level (i.e., joint projects between education and health and human services agencies).

Provide incentives and technical assistance to encourage local implementation of transition services. States need to allow for local flexibility and encourage local ownership. Providing technical assistance, including assistance with staff training and linking comprehensive services to schools, is an appropriate role for states. Incentives to collaborate also should be provided at the local level, including time, training, and resources for implementing transition activities. Local ownership can be facilitated through the establishment of local

advisory or policy councils with representation from the early childhood community, public schools, parents, and health and human service providers.

In addition to implementing the recommendations above, states should consider the following long-term strategies.

Establish early childhood units in elementary schools. The National Association of State Boards of Education, in its 1988 report titled *Right from the Start,* defined early childhood units as a restructured approach to schooling for four- to eight-year-olds that calls for new partnerships among schools, parents, and other early childhood programs to better serve young children and their families. Early childhood units encourage continuity of learning and practices that are developmentally appropriate to meet the needs of young learners. Strategies for implementing such units include multiage grouping, team teaching, and assigning a group of staff and children to work together over several years. The National Association of State Boards of Education notes that although models must be crafted to meet community needs, five principles should underlie all efforts: developmentally appropriate curriculum, improved assessment, responsiveness to cultural and linguistic diversity, partnerships with parents, and training and support for staff and administrators.[21]

Revise assessment practices for young children. Standardized testing is widespread in schools.[22] Standardized tests, and readiness tests in particular, play a large role in the prevalence of kindergarten retention and extra-year programs. The younger the child being tested, however, the more difficult it is to obtain reliable and valid results from standardized tests because of the enormous individual variation in the patterns and timing of children's growth and development.[23] The National Association for the Education of Young Children advocates a "utility criterion" for testing (i.e., the purpose of testing must be to improve services for children and ensure that children benefit from their educational experiences). The association also calls for the use of multiple sources of information (e.g., information from student portfolios, anecdotal records, systematic observations, and communication with parents) when making important placement, enrollment, or retention decisions affecting young children.[24]

Reform the licensing, training, and compensation plans of all early childhood teachers. Currently, there are large differentials in the salary, training, and licensing requirements of early childhood teachers employed in various sectors. Preschool teachers employed by public

schools generally are trained and compensated at a much higher level than other early care providers, in accordance with public school system salary schedules and certification requirements. Early care providers outside this system generally earn significantly less, have inadequate benefits, and have far fewer opportunities for training and career advancement. They may, in some cases, have no training whatsoever. Primarily because of low pay, high staff turnover is common, with negative consequences for the development of children. States should focus on high-quality early childhood experiences for all children both before and after school enrollment. States should also look at ways to expand training opportunities for all early childhood teachers and improve compensation through incentive grants or career development ladders linked with a new training system.

Eliminate the retention of young children. The negative effects of retention and extra-year "readiness" classes are clear. Children—primarily minority, poor, and male children—are affected academically, socially, and emotionally. Retention is also costly to states. Data from Florida show the cost of educating the 38,404 students retained in kindergarten through third grade in 1988-89 at $143,630,960.[25] By getting schools ready for children through the use of appropriate curriculum, instruction, and assessment that meet the developmental needs of the children being served, retention and extra-year programs should no longer be necessary.

Early childhood transition services are an emerging issue at the national level. States are well-positioned to play a strong role in this movement, moving forward in crafting statewide frameworks and ensuring appropriate implementation of services at the local level. Ready-to-learn children need ready-to-teach schools that will meet the developmental needs of these children and provide comprehensive support during this important, and perhaps critical, transition period.

Endnotes

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